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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SCUL](#) [ECON](#) [RS](#) [UP](#)
SUBJECT: PATRIARCH KIRILL'S UKRAINE TRIP: DOMESTIC AND
FOREIGN POLITICAL GOALS

Classified By: CDA Eric Rubin; reasons 1.4(b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In light of the escalating diplomatic tensions between Moscow and Kyiv, the objectives of Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) Patriarch Kirill's July 27-August 5 visit to Ukraine are receiving renewed scrutiny, with an emphasis on his engagement with President Yushchenko and his amended itinerary to Western Ukraine. Though government-affiliated and more independent Russian media generally hailed the visit as a success for the Church, the ROC has been at pains to spin the visit as non-political, an assessment not surprisingly shared by the MFA. Church officials told us privately, however, that Kirill's messages of readiness to work with whomever Ukrainians choose as their leaders, support for Ukrainian independence and his pre-trip comments on Nazism/fascism and Stalinism/communism were addressed to audiences both in Ukraine and Russia itself, to whom he is attempting to demonstrate that he and the ROC operate independently of the Kremlin. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) ROC Patriarch Kirill visited Ukraine July 27-August 5, his first trip there since his elevation earlier this year. Kirill's visit received considerable media attention in Russia, in particular his visits to Sevastopol, his meetings with government and opposition political figures in Kyiv, including President Yushchenko and opposition leader Viktor Yanukovich, as well as the change in his itinerary by GOU authorities concerned for his safety which prevented him from visiting some cities in western Ukraine. Extensive coverage of Kirill's 90-minute question and answer session, carried live on Ukrainian national television, was repeated in Russia. Kirill benefited from an otherwise slow Russian news cycle during his travels. His speeches and meetings were featured on state-run evening television news programs, and also garnered substantial positive coverage from print media.

¶3. (SBU) At Kirill's request, upon his return to Russia he met President Medvedev to brief him on the trip, emphasizing his call that Russia and Ukraine focus on their commonality and strengthening of relations, not on areas of disagreement. Senior Church officials took the extraordinary step of holding a press conference August 6 to spin the trip. Chairman of the External Relations Department Archbishop Hilarion painted the visit in a very positive light, stressing the outpourings of affection toward Kirill, while acknowledging some opposition to his call for Orthodox unity (under the ROC's leadership) with respect for some Ukrainian local governance. He downplayed reports of inter- and intra-Church disagreement during the visit, and of any tensions during Kirill's meeting with Yushchenko. Archpriest Chaplin, former head of the ROC's External Relations Department, underlined the significance of Kirill's public and private messages related to Ukraine's aspirations for membership in the European community.

¶4. (C) Deputy Head of External Relations for the ROC, Father Filip Ryabykh, who accompanied Kirill on the trip, told us August 6 that Kirill was pleased at having achieved not only his religious, but his principal political objectives. Foremost among these was his desire to demonstrate that the ROC - and Kirill himself - operate independently of Kremlin direction. While this issue is currently being debated among foreign observers, especially in light of the upswing in diplomatic tensions between Moscow and Kyiv, Filip told us that Kirill was cognizant that his words would be scrutinized in Ukraine, and therefore wanted to deliver a strong message of support for Ukraine's sovereignty and statehood, and for future cooperation with whomever voters selected as their leaders. Filip said Kirill was adamant that this message be publicized in Russia as well, to demonstrate to the Kremlin, as well as to ROC critics, that the ROC would speak out for what it determines is in its interests, not the Kremlin's. Significantly, Kirill visited the Kyiv memorial to the victims of the 1930's era famine (a site studiously avoided by Medvedev and other GOR officials) - noting the "holodomor" was a product of Soviet oppression.

¶5. (C) In this regard, Father Filip elaborated on the contentious debate in and outside Russia surrounding Nazism and Stalinism. While Hilarion's declaration just before the trip that both concepts were manifestations of evil and Kirill's "clarification" - that Nazism is based on pure hatred, and Stalinism on repression - may have been ignored by many, Filip related that they were both very much part of

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Kirill's pre-Ukraine trip attempts to deal with a topic that has political ramifications both in Ukraine and Russia. Filip suggested Kirill wanted to be clear that both forms of totalitarianism were and are unacceptable, that both did great harm to Russian and Ukrainian peoples and to the Church, but that revisiting painful historical periods diverted followers from the work of the present: reconciliation and the building of deeper, peaceful future cooperation. Aware that Kirill was touching on a sensitive issue for Russians as well as Ukrainians, Filip commented, the Patriarch spoke out of conviction without concern for its domestic - or foreign - political consequences for him. Filip acknowledged that some in Ukraine might perceive the remarks as directed solely to them, but reiterated that the message was meant for Russians, too.

¶6. (C) Filip pointed out that, in Kirill's conversation with Medvedev, there had been no discussion of specific messages that could be taken either in Kyiv or Moscow to improve Ukrainian-Russian relations. Rather, Kirill repeated his message that the Church would work with whomever is in power, and that he intended to make more frequent, and likely shorter, trips to Ukraine in order to promote Orthodox unity and cooperation.

MFA: Kirill's Visit "Not Political"

¶7. (C) MFA Second CIS Department Deputy Director Yuriy Mordvintsev reiterated August 12 that Kirill's visit to Ukraine was of "pastoral, not political nature." Describing Ukraine as a "complicated" part of the ROC's area of authority, due to the presence of significant Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic and ethnic Russian populations, he characterized the Orthodox faith as one of the factors unifying the Ukrainian and Russian peoples. He dismissed Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kyiv Patriarchate) leader Filaret as a "schismatic," and rejected what he called Yushchenko's attempts to politicize Kirill's refusal to deal with Filaret.

Comment

18. (C) Medvedev's harsh August 11 message to Ukrainian leaders (septel), delivered just a week after Kirill's return, in which he cited the visit and said he agreed with Kirill's assessments (not detailed) of Ukraine, has put ROC officials in an awkward position. While acknowledging the strong religious and cultural ties between Russians and Ukrainians, Kirill was careful not to offend Ukrainian sensibilities - even at one point offering to take on Ukrainian citizenship if that would help heal the rift between the Churches. Kirill's offer of eventual autocephaly of a united Ukrainian Orthodox Church was made with the understanding it would be under Moscow's terms - not Filaret's. ROC officials' positive spin on Kirill's visit notwithstanding, the fact that relations with Ukraine have now deteriorated even further has complicated the ROC's ambitious, and almost certainly unrealistic, goals of longer-term religious cooperation under the Moscow Patriarch's leadership. The trust and confidence needed for that cooperation may have also been damaged by Medvedev's latest salvo. However determined Kirill may be to demonstrate that he is his own man, the ROC has always followed the GOR's lead in foreign policy, and can be expected to do so in regard to Ukraine as well.

RUBIN